

What is Thinking?

Theater Avant-Garden De Onderneming

The Belgian theatre group *De Onderneming* visited Oslo with a production that combines philosophy with the love story between two of the perhaps most widely known intellectuals of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. When they met in 1924, Arendt was an eighteen-year-old student and Heidegger a thirty-five-year-old married man, father of two children. He was her first teacher in philosophy who had just begun writing his most famous book, *Being and Time (Sein und Zeit)*. They started a romance.

In 1933, Heidegger became a member of the NSDAP, while Arendt, the Jew, had to flee Germany to Paris, in 1941 moving on to New York. The love relationships between the NSDAP-member Heidegger and the young Jewess Arendt would alone have been enough material for a novel. The even more remarkable fact is that Arendt decided to meet him again after the war. Two decades after their last encounter, in 1950, she wrote to him when she came to Freiburg, and they met again.

Carly Wijs, who plays the role of Hannah Arendt, read an article in the nineties about Hannah Arendt and the Eichmann trial. That made her want to read some of Arendt's essays. The long monologue that she gives on stage, 75 minutes long, displays a deep understanding of Hannah Arendt the young woman who truly admired Heidegger, who is courageous enough to let love happen, but who is also reasonable enough to see that Heidegger was not really a brave man. Carly is not simply reading to us from the letters, she is commenting on them and thus leading the spectators more and more into Arendt's way of thinking.

In fact, the love relationship provides the background for philosophical reflections on thinking. Arendt and Heidegger equally shared in the passion for thinking. But the performance does more: it visualizes the relation between emotion and thinking. 'You are only as intelligent as your emotions allow you to be', says Carly Wijs. She goes on: 'The play has three character lines: Heidegger, the man who thinks and who is a Nazi; Eichmann, the man who doesn't think and is not an ideological Nazi, but who joins the NSDAP simply in order to make a career for himself; and Arendt, the Jewess who is telling the truth on a factual level and who has the courage to judge.'

In fact, the performance starts with a film fragment of Adolf Eichmann, the man who says about himself that he was a specialist on emigration. Carly Wijs then begins reading from letters, journal fragments, and philosophical writings. She told me that much of the material was written by her and Ryszard Turbiasz. What makes their performance so special is that the actors not only highlight the characters' passion for thinking; they are also able to show that there are no rational answers to all questions. 'You can't explain why you forgive a person you love', Wyjs tells me. She goes on, 'forgiving Heidegger and taking care of his works makes Arendt the most important woman in his life.'

Since the production is not intended to be a lesson in philosophy, the actors had to discuss beforehand how Heidegger should be presented. They found a very sensual and convincing solution. After Wyjs presents the long monologue of Hannah Arendt, she leaves the stage and Ryszard Turbiasz steps forward with an improvised monologue of Bach's last fugue and Franz Beckenbauer's insight into football. Turbiasz tells me that he got the idea while reading Safranski's biography of Heidegger. Heidegger's fascination for football is underscored by a Monty Python sketch in which ancient Greek philosophers play against a German team that includes both Heidegger and Beckenbauer. The actors subtly interweave entertainment and thinking, drawing the parallel between art and politics and then passing on to the capacity of judgment. By doing so, they return to the beginning motif, to the relation between emotion and thinking. *What is Thinking?* is a splendid performance, undoubtedly a pleasure both for thinking and for viewing.

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